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Press Coverage of the EU and NATO. Accession Processes in Hungary and Romania in the 1990s

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Press Coverage of the EU and NATO Accession Processes in Hungary and Romania in the 1990s

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This chapter provides an analysis of Hungarian and Romanian EU and NATO accession coverage by some of these countries' most influential newspapers. It is argued that a common fault of the papers is their inability to provide particular interest groups, local communities, regions and professionals with relevant information. The chapter concludes by providing recommendations for improving government communication and public relations regarding accession that may overcome the media shortcomings in not only Hungary and Romania, but in other accession countries as well.

1. Introduction

This research compares how the major daily newspapers in Hungary and Romania cover the critical regional issue of European Union (EU) and North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accession and, by extension, the Western European model of democratic development. The basis of the research is content analysis during the period 1992-1999 of press coverage on this topic.

Under communist regimes the press was an extension of political power (Hegedűs 2001a). Audiences were conditioned to accept the status quo. Even in the current environment of the new democracies, with new political relationships and ownership structures, the concept of public service broadcasting is not clearly defined (Bíró 1998; Bajomi-Lázár 2000).

While the phenomenon of 'structural bias,' especially in news production, was long ago recognized in Western media research (Jenei 2001), newly spawned democratic societies remain particularly vulnerable to the manipulation of information due to scant experience in detecting censored, misleading or hidden information (Macovei 1997). Problems related to the specific tradition of manipulated information in the former Soviet bloc are compounded by the kinds of media dilemmas also common in the West related to economics and professional independence.

Several surveys have been conducted in Western Europe on press coverage of the accession processes. Mogens Schmidt (2001) provides an

East/West perspective while identifying media tendencies to represent and interpret information according to international “mirror” stereotypes. Deirdre Kevin (2001) describes the findings of an international comparative research project that included several Western European countries. Studies focusing on media coverage of accession in Eastern Central Europe are fewer and more sporadic. Grigorij Meseznikov (2001) describes the case of Slovakia, while Snjezana Milivojevic (2001) investigates media coverage of accession in Serbia.

Only two surveys of media coverage of the accession processes have been conducted which focus on Hungary and Romania. In the first study, Tamás Terestényi and his team carried out quantitative content analysis of accession-related articles published in Hungary in 2000 and provided a comparison of many national and regional newspapers (Terestényi 2001). My research covers a much longer time period (the entire 1990s), and the quantitative analysis targets only four major dailies from the two countries. Although the empirical data is not identical, the most important findings of both studies overlap concerning (1) the shortcomings of accession-related news and articles, and (2) the militant ideological representation of the entire accession processes, which has left little room for critical reflection.

The second study, by István Hegedűs, is based on qualitative data from the Hungarian accession-related press (Hegedűs 2001b). Hegedűs explores how accession discourse constructs a “protocolistic” landscape of events alienated from the everyday life perspective in which most people view their role in the accession processes. His conclusion also overlaps with this report’s findings, which highlight the undifferentiated, locally insensitive and hardly accessible style of the relevant articles.

The comparative framework chosen for this analysis, i.e. Hungarian vs. Romanian and Hungarian from Romania, needs some clarification. Hungary’s neighboring countries have sizeable ethnic Hungarian minorities. In Romania alone there live approximately two million ethnic Hungarians. This minority community has about sixty different newspapers, including weeklies and reviews. Obviously, this Hungarian cultural and media island is part of Romania’s domestic cultural pool. However, Hungarian community institutions identify themselves and are seen in both countries as part of Hungarian culture. Therefore, the Hungarian-language media in Romania is an intersection between the domestic cultural arena of both countries.

The policy recommendations found in the conclusion of this chapter aim to counterbalance the effects of misinformation. It is assumed that distorted information on the accession processes can have the following consequences:

- (1) weak or non-existent accession strategies at various levels (regional, local, professional);
- (2) exaggerated reactions, opinions and misunderstanding about the impact of accession on all levels, including the local level;
- (3) the instrumentalization of accession as a legitimizing label for potentially any issue;
- (4) a low level of preparation for accession;
- (5) disappointment among misinformed groups following accession;
- (6) disillusionment at the domestic level that leads to disappointment at the international level, both within the EU and the candidate countries, which reinforces anti-enlargement voices both inside and outside the EU (and NATO) ;
- (7) disappointment with the press as an inefficient and erroneous agent of information.

2. Methodology: The scope and focus of the research

The policy recommendations of this research are based upon the selection and interpretation of newspaper articles that report or comment on events related to the enlargement process as well as the internal dynamics of the EU and NATO. Data was collected from the following four daily newspapers:

Hungary

- *Magyar Nemzet* ("Hungarian Nation" - conservative)
- *Népszabadság* ("People's Freedom" - socialist),

Romania

- *România liberă* ("Free Romania" - liberal)
- *Szabadság* ("Freedom" - conservative);¹

These publications were selected for the following reasons:

1. The newspapers have a significant country-wide or regional influence.
2. They represent both the left/liberal and the right/conservative/nationalist cleavages of press culture. The parameters of each of the titles above, including their location, circulation, publisher and owner, are described in Table 1.

1. Szabadság is published in Hungarian and targets the Hungarian minority in Romania.

Table 1. The selected dailies

Name of publication	Type of publication	Location	Region/country	Political orientation	Owner/publisher
<i>Népszabadság</i>	national daily	Budapest	Hungary	socialist	Bertelsmann
<i>Magyar Nemzet</i>	national daily	Budapest	Hungary	conservative	Postabank Press and Media Kft. (until 2000/04/07)
<i>România liberă</i>	national daily	Bucharest	Romania	liberal	“R” SA.
<i>Szabadság</i>	regional daily	Cluj	Transylvania (Romania)	conservative	Szabadság KFT, Minerva Foundation

From these newspapers, comments were analyzed concerning eight major events pertaining to the EU and NATO accession processes and the internal dynamics of the EU and NATO. News coverage was monitored on the day of each event and on the seven days following each event. The analysis was qualitative and consisted of two parts, as described below.

The quantitative data and analysis in *Part A* concerns eight major events regarding the EU and NATO integration and accession processes:

- the Treaty on European Union in Maastricht (July 2, 1992);
- the first day of the European Market (January 1, 1993);
- the Copenhagen meeting on EU Enlargement (June, 1993);
- the ratification of the EU Treaty (January 11, 1993);
- the NATO Summit (January 1, 1994);
- the Luxemburg meeting on enlargement (December 12-13, 1997);
- the start of the negotiations on enlargement (March, 1998);
- the Helsinki meeting for enlargement (December 21-22, 1999).

Two types of events were selected for this list: those with a major impact on the internal dynamics of EU and NATO integration; and those playing a part in eastern enlargement, especially concerning Hungary and Romania.

On the basis of the content of each press article, the coverage of the accession-related event was thematically categorized as:

- 1) a domestic issue (national issue within a candidate country),
- 2) an internal issue (within the EU),

- 3) a regional issue,
- 4) a local/micro issue.

The term 'regional' refers both to the countries that are candidates for either EU or NATO accession as well as particular regions within one of the candidate countries. To that end, the term 'region' is specified by the context of each case. The terms 'local/micro' in category (4) describe events or comments that either have a restricted local relevance or refer to the impact of the accession processes within a specialized professional area. Obviously one article may refer to more than one issue, accounting for the fact that the number of issues in the articles often exceed the number of articles about a particular event.

Part B focuses on a qualitative analysis of a wider selection of press articles. This section does not address the coverage of pre-selected major events, but analyzes other important commentaries, including opinion articles and historical and cultural considerations on the accession processes.

The selection criterion for *Part B* is based on two major considerations. Firstly, the wider selection and qualitative method is meant to counter-balance the inevitable insufficient and more limited systematic analysis (*Part A*). Secondly, this method sketches the background of the EU and NATO accession processes, and reflects the general atmosphere of the discourse on the issue.

In *Part B* information from the four dailies in *Part A*, as well as three other newspapers – the Hungarian *HVG* (Weekly Economy, a liberal economic-political weekly), *Új Magyarország* (New Hungary, a conservative political daily), and the Romanian 22 (a weekly of the Group for Social Dialogue) – is considered.

The categories described above are, of course, not exhaustive, and were selected in an attempt to address the most important accession issues and relevant debates on the EU and NATO as they appear in the selected dailies.

The concluding policy recommendations aim at enhancing the quality of communication and offer alternative ways to inspire an independent and differentiated public discourse on the EU and NATO accessions.

3. Research findings: A gap between media content and audience interest

3. 1. Part A: Quantitative analysis

The research findings of **Part A** (quantitative analysis) are summarized in Tables 2-7 and discussed below.

Table 2. Issues in Magyar Nemzet

Selected Events	Issues in the Articles				
	Domestic issue	Regional issue	Internal EU/NATO	Local/micro issue	<i>Total issues related to the event</i>
2/7/92: Treaty on European Union in Maastricht	0	0	0	0	0
1/1/93: The European Market becomes reality	0	0	2	0	2
6/93: Copenhagen meeting for enlargement	4	9	5	0	18
11/1/93: Ratification of the Treaty on European Union	1	0	3	0	4
01/94: NATO Summit	6	20	18	0	44
12-13/12/97: Luxemburg meeting for enlargement	4	10	10	0	24
3/98: Start of negotiations for enlargement	4	1	1	1	7
12/99: Helsinki meeting for enlargement	6	6	3	1	16
<i>Total issues in the articles</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>115</i>

Table 3. Issues in Népszabadság

Selected Events	Issues in the Articles				
	Domestic issue	Regional issue	Internal EU/NATO	Local/micro issue	<i>Total issues related to the event</i>
2/7/92: Treaty on European Union in Maastricht	12	12	12	0	36
1/1/93: The European Market becomes reality	11	10	11	0	32
6/93: Copenhagen meeting for enlargement	10	17	12	0	39
11/1/93: Ratification of the Treaty on European Union	10	10	13	0	33
1/94: NATO Summit	14	25	26	0	65
12-13/12/97: Luxemburg meeting for enlargement	17	16	14	0	47
3/98: Start of negotiations for enlargement	3	13	13	0	29
12/99: Helsinki meeting for enlargement	5	13	13	1	32
<i>Total issues in the articles</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>313</i>

Table 4. Issues in România Liberă

Selected Events	Issues in the Articles				
	Domestic issue	Regional issue	Internal EU/NATO	Local/micro issue	<i>Total issues related to the event</i>
2/7/92: Treaty on Euro- pean Union in Maastricht	0	0	1	0	1
1/1/93: The European Market becomes reality	0	0	2	0	2
6/93: Copenhagen meeting for enlargement	2	2	2	0	6
11/1/93: Ratification of the Treaty on European Union	2	0	3	0	5
1/94: NATO Summit	2	3	5	0	10
12-13/12/97: Luxemburg meeting for enlargement	4	4	2	0	10
3/98: Start of negotiations for enlargement	0	5	1	0	6
12/99: Helsinki meeting for enlargement	6	3	2	0	11
<i>Total issues in the articles</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>51</i>

Table 5. Issues in Szabadság

Issues in the Articles					
Selected Events	Domestic issue	Regional issue	Internal EU/NATO	Local/micro issue	Total issues related to the event
2/7/92: Treaty on European Union in Maastricht	0	0	1	0	1
1/1/93: The European Market becomes reality	1	0	1	0	2
6/93: Copenhagen meeting for enlargement	0	0	0	0	0
11/1/93: Ratification of the Treaty on European Union	0	0	0	0	0
1/94: NATO Summit	2	9	8	0	19
12-13/12/97: Luxembourg meeting for enlargement	1	3	2	0	6
3/98: Start of negotiations for enlargement	2	4	0	0	6
12/99: Helsinki meeting for enlargement	2	4	0	0	6
Total issues in the articles	8	20	12	0	40

Table 6. Aggregate of issues from tables 2-5.

Accession Related Issues in Daily Newspapers					
Issues	<i>Magyar Nemzet</i>	<i>Népszabadság</i>	<i>România liberă</i>	<i>Szabadság</i>	Total issues in four daily newspapers
Domestic	25	82	16	8	131
Regional	46	116	17	20	199
Internal EU/NATO	42	114	18	12	186
Local/micro issue	2	1	0	0	3
Total number of issues	115	313	51	40	519

Table 7. Total number of articles

	Magyar Nemzet	Nép- szabadság	România liberă	Szabadság	Total number of articles in all papers
<i>Total number of articles per paper</i>	101	107	45	39	292

The most striking findings derived from the analysis of these articles is the fact that all of them (including those in *Part B*) lack any information on the local relevance of the EU and NATO accession processes. Instead, the press offers information on the accession processes that is alienated from the everyday life of most people. Accession-related news generally appear in the international section. Less often it appears in the economic section; even more rarely it is portrayed as a domestic (internal) issue; and it is almost never described within the context of local news with particular implications. The published opinions are predominantly those of politicians, i.e. ‘official sources’. Independent expert views appear rarely and unsystematically. In conclusion, the “protocolistic” style is so remote from the reader’s everyday language that the reader cannot discern the possible impact of accession on her/his own life (this finding corresponds with that of Terestényi, 2001).

There appeared four times as many accession-related news articles in the second half of the 1990s compared to the first half of the decade. Furthermore, editorials/commentaries on the accession processes during the first half of the decade were scarce and unsystematic. The EU event that attracted the most coverage among our selected newspapers was the Luxemburg meeting on enlargement in December 1997. With regard to its regional importance for the candidate countries, the Copenhagen meeting in 1993 was considered to have roughly the same level of significance, but it received much less commentary than the Luxemburg event which took place almost four years later. This difference in the level of coverage had little to do with how the press ranked the importance of these two events, but rather is best explained by the increasing levels of interest and awareness among Hungarians and Romanians about the accession process as it developed over time.

Despite the fact that discourse about Europe during the 1990s saw a gradual shift from conceptions of European unity based on cultural and historical ties toward those based on economic pragmatism, press coverage regarding the local relevance of accession in Hungary and Romania remained almost non-existent during this period. Interestingly, coverage of local events and commentary on

the accession processes actually *decreased* during the second half of the 1990s compared to the first half.

Over time, discourse on the accession processes gradually became an account of technical details on how to ‘get in’ and join the elite EU club. At the beginning of the decade, the unsystematic discourse focused on the cultural connotations of being ‘European’, especially in both languages of the Romanian press. This focus on questions of European identity persisted much longer in the moderate press of Romania (even until late 1997). Some examples of specific articles: *România Liberă*: “Romania is part of Europe” (December 18, 1997), “Romania opts for a ‘reunification of Europe’” (December 12, 1997), “A Europe of big schisms?” (October 12, 1997 – an article accusing Western Europe of excluding Romania and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in general since the Middle Ages).

In more than 60 percent of the articles, the Hungarian press commented on all three major EU-related events from 1993 onwards in a predominantly negative light, highlighting on three major criticisms: (1) the EU’s poor performance in managing the Yugoslav crisis, (2) its poor response to economic recession, and (3) an unclear strategy or even a lack of willingness to accept the accession of Eastern European countries. Commentary describes the general inefficiency of both the EU and NATO in managing their internal and foreign affairs. For example: *Népszabadság*: “Borderless Europe” (February 1, 1993), “Is Visegrád visible from Copenhagen?” (June 21, 1993), and in *HVG*: “Doubtful Market” (January 5, 1993).

Within the context of Hungary’s left/liberal vs. right/conservative cleavage, controversy about NATO is focused on the issue of state sovereignty. Those who stress the necessity of NATO membership cannot convince the nationalist-oriented electorate afraid of the possible return to military dependency. Arguments for NATO membership and EU accession were usually based on pragmatic security and economic reasoning. Pro-accession arguments generally do not contain information, however, as to how accession is likely to impact people’s everyday lives.

Meanwhile, Romanian press coverage of the ratification of the European Union in 1993 was virtually absent due to the fact that it was overshadowed by Romania’s acceptance as a member of the Council of Europe one month prior. Given the Europe-wide importance of EU ratification, and its special regional and domestic significance, this under-representation seems unjustified.

Every second article demonstrates that Romania’s acceptance as a member of the Council of Europe and the EU ratification were misunderstood by the media, especially in the Hungarian-language press (the daily *Szabadság* made no mention of EU ratification whatsoever). The press described Council of Europe membership as a disproportionately great achievement rather than one step in a long-term process of building institutional relationships within the EU.

Both the Romanian- and Hungarian-language press – in hard news articles as well as commentary – often exaggerate the significance of events pushing the accession processes ahead (especially in Romania). Exaggerations regarding the chances and speed of the accession processes take the form of both unrealistic skepticism and unrealistic optimism. For example, the NATO partnership debate featured articles such as the following: *România Liberă* “Have we already lost a historical chance?” (January 14, 1994), “Fake victory” (February 10, 1994) and “Luxemburg, a new rejection?” (November 12, 1997); *Szabadság*: “Europe has taken us into her arms” (October 10, 1993), “Success in Strasbourg” (November 29, 1993); or *Magyar Nemzet* on NATO enlargement and partnership issues: “This can lead to a new Cold War” (January 6, 1994).

3.2. Part B: Qualitative analysis

The following qualitative analysis explores the most significant frames of interpretation (the term ‘frame’ is used here to denote a recurring opinion or conceptualization of accession-related information) in the press coverage of the accession processes from 1991-2000. The ‘most significant’ frames of interpretation appeared more than once in connection with a single event and in more than one newspaper. This section contains information from the dailies above as well as from *HVG* and *Új Magyarország* in Hungary, and the weekly 22 in Romania. The identified frames of interpretation are as follows:

- EU and/or NATO accession-related issues as historic events;
- the lack of consensus within the EU and/or NATO;
- misunderstood and/or overestimated domestic success;
- accession as the real test for domestic capabilities;
- the post-state-socialist region being ‘bribed’ by semi-promises;
- enlargement as a European interest;
- European skepticism about enlargement;
- the underestimation of domestic success;
- domestic rhetoric claiming acceptance “because we are the country between East and West”;
- explaining the slow speed of the process with the low performance of domestic government;
- accession as a rhetorical national cause (“our nation belongs to Europe anyway”);
- minority rights as part of regional stability;

- the issue of equal treatment during candidacy;
- Hungarian belief that the country should be treated as a ‘more worthy’ candidate;
- premature and dangerous NATO enlargement (both as an opinion within EU and as a domestic opinion);
- accession as a common cause among Hungarians living in neighboring countries;
- diverse meanings of Europe (national pride vs. shame; messianism vs. pragmatism), and
- internal EU controversy regarding Turkey.

In Hungary, the left/liberal vs. right/conservative/nationalist cleavage can be detected in press interpretations of the general goal of the accession processes. The former approach asserts that accession is a highly desirable priority. Any political or professional action that does not further the accession cause, i.e. does not meet conditions necessary for accession to be accomplished, must be categorically rejected. In contrast, the latter approach suggests that although accession is a major issue, it is not as important as the preservation of national characteristics in everyday culture, public norms, and even in business investments. From this perspective, the problems of the vast Hungarian minority in Hungary’s neighboring countries, and especially in Romania, which will surely join the EU later than Hungary, are unsolved problems that are a major concern for both the right/conservative/nationalist electorate as well as inter-state relationships.

The left/liberal camp always emphasizes the importance of the Hungarian-Romanian inter-state agreement upholding the status quo and enhancing cultural and economic cooperation. The right/conservative/nationalist camp argues that the official inter-state agreement has never been respected and that the content of the agreement does not guarantee the legal and cultural well-being of the Hungarian minorities.

Even the moderate press in Hungary published many criticisms of the EU in the early 1990s. From the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria in late 1993 onwards, however, and especially after the Luxemburg meeting on enlargement in 1997, the voices critical of the EU have entirely disappeared from the moderate press and remain present only in the press of the extreme right and left (a finding of Terestényi’s research team for the year 2000 as well).

Rather than a general clash of views on accession, this shift in attitude is best explained by a growing acceptance of the accession processes as something inevitable. The less cautious, critical voices that often emerged in the

earlier period of the 1990s were inspired by a lack of information rather than a conscious rejection of any particular European issue. Unfortunately however, both the critical, misinformed voices of the early 1990s and the loyal, approving voices of the late 1990s based their arguments on distorted information.

By 1997, formulations like “we have always belonged to Europe” or “we do actually belong to Europe but, unjustly, this is not sufficiently recognized” remained in Hungary only in the extreme right media. Interestingly, the extreme right press in the late 1990s argued simultaneously for and against EU accession from a nationalist perspective. Similar nationalist formulations of historic rights persisted in both the radical and the moderate press in Romania during the same period. In general, the extreme right in Romania was much more cautious when arguing against accession than the Hungarian extreme right. For example: *România Liberă*: “A national cause” (December 15, 1997); *Magyar Nemzet*: “Does globalization endanger national existence?” (December 24, 1999).

4. Recommendations: A counterbalancing strategy

Based on this analysis, the following policies may be implemented by the press (recommendations 1-3) and policymakers and government public relations experts (recommendations 3-7) to counterbalance current media failures:

1. In addition to general information on the national, international and regional significance of EU and NATO accession, the media should cover EU- and NATO-related news by targeting specific audiences such as professional and social groups and the inhabitants of particular geographic regions and localities. The small-scale implications of accession should be explored, not hidden.
2. The local press should cover the accession processes in a more diversified manner, explaining possible local impact in detail.
3. Government officials and policymakers responsible for EU and NATO accession in candidate states should build closer relations with under-informed local audiences through public relations activities such as public seminars on the accession processes, including professional training.
4. Government officials and policymakers responsible for EU and NATO accession in candidate states should sponsor more newspaper sections, media programs and other publications with a focus on current issues and the importance of the accession processes.

5. Government officials and policymakers responsible for EU and NATO accession in candidate states should support the publication of foreign-language news informing the European public about domestic issues in candidate countries.
6. They should also provide the press with more information about accession-related events in other candidate countries.
7. Advanced education on the EU and NATO accession processes, with a special focus on domestic implications, should be provided for journalists.

5. Why These Recommendations?

The research findings above demonstrate the low capability of the local media to provide extensive information on accession that is relevant for local audiences. Rather than arbitrarily increasing the amount of accession-related information in existing media in East Central European accession countries, a policy strategy is needed that utilizes public relations activities with officials and accession and media experts, and opens alternative channels of information. The public dissemination of accession-related information through better-informed government public relations mechanisms and the press is needed to keep the public informed about the real impact of accession. For, as it now stands, public opinion is too often being formulated by skewed interpretations of misinformed journalists.

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